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ABSTRACT

College composition instructors have the opportunity to take a step toward meeting the needs of a pluralistic society by defining a developmental writing curriculum that incorporates the same strategies that characterize the mainstream writing classroom. The "cognitive deficiency model" that characterizes most instruction in developmental writing classrooms arose out of the experience of high attrition rates following the influx of unprepared minority students and working class students in the 1960s. Ironically, the model emerged not only as higher education was becoming more pluralistic but also as scholars were advocating a shift from a product-oriented, bottom-up model of composition instruction to a process-oriented, top-down model. Beginning in earnest in the mid 1970s, a wave of non-European immigration has increased markedly the number of nonnative English-speaking students in composition classes. Although their language skills are not equal to those of native speakers, most of these English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students cannot be classified as limited English proficient. Once in developmental writing classes, they face obstacles related to the cognitive deficiency model and a pedagogy that focuses on subskills rather than writing. Directors of composition programs must provide the stimulus to modify existing curricula and methods. Teachers need to devise and implement a standardized curriculum that is congruent with the theoretical approach the director sets for the program, a standardized curriculum that emphasizes the fundamental similarities among students striving to become better writers. (RS)

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Defining a Developmental Curriculum for a Pluralistic Society: The Administrative Challenges

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The demographics of our colleges and universities began changing significantly after World War II as a result of three distinct waves of students entering higher education. The first wave consisted of those thousands of veterans who, funded by the GI Bill, traded in their uniforms for textbooks. The GIs came from working-class America, for the most part, and presented various challenges to professors accustomed to working with students better prepared than this new batch of freshmen, who were not as well-read as more traditional students. By and large, however, the adjustments schools and faculty had to make were relatively easy: The GI's maturity and discipline more than compensated for the lack of a prep-school education; and their residency was brief. Few GIs were enrolled in the nation's colleges six years after the war ended.

The second phase of demographic change began during the mid-1960s, when the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War created a wave of internal refugees who flocked to the nation's colleges and universities. Various minority groups, by virtue of previously unobtainable financial aid, entered higher education for the first time. Working-class students, faced with the choice between carrying a rifle to Vietnam or a book to class, enrolled in colleges by the tens of thousands. Responding to the needs of a generation, many schools adopted open admissions policies, allowing anyone with a high school diploma to attend.

Generally, these students were seriously unprepared for college, and colleges were largely unprepared for them. Faculty faced varieties of English that had long been associated with ghettos and the working class, neither of which fit into the cultivated image of ivory towerism on most campuses. The students' written language was judged not only unacceptable but also incomprehensible by academic standards, and large numbers of students failed. The attrition rate at some community colleges in California during this period, for example, was as high as 70 percent. Given such numbers and the lack of preparedness on the part of so many, it became easy to equate nonstandard English with failure and stupidity.

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Out of this experience arose the "cognitive deficiency model," which had and continues to have a powerful effect on literacy education. The basic tenets of this model hold that students from impoverished cultural environments have impoverished language skills, as evidenced in the use of nonstandard features such as lapses in subject-verb agreement, tense marking, and so forth. The model draws extensively from linguistic relativism, which claims that language influences the nature of thought. The educational implication of this model is quite harsh: Poor writers are simply poor thinkers. In this account, students who have not acquired standard English will produce writing that is deficient in both form and content.

At a time when some groups were arguing that students have the right to their own language, the cognitive deficiency model served to justify not only mastery of standard English but also the focus on surface features in composition teaching that had existed for generations at most schools. The rationale was based on two assumptions: first, that grammar and usage were the foundation for learning how to write standard English; and second, that the study of grammar and usage would translate into mature cognitive functioning. The presumed link became a battle cry heard ever more frequently from composition teachers during this period: "This class is not designed to teach you how to write; it is designed to teach you how to think."

Ironically, the cognitive deficiency model emerged not only as our schools were becoming more pluralistic but also at about the same time that various scholars were changing the way the profession looked at writing instruction. Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer; Bateman and Zidonis; Elley, Barham, Lamb, and Wyllie; and others were demonstrating the lack of any significant correlation between grammar instruction and writing performance. Janet Emig, James Britton, and others were stimulating a shift from a product-oriented, bottom-up model of composition instruction to a process-oriented, top-down model.

The emerging composition theories and research, however, focused on mainstream students. Many teachers accepted the idea that mainstream students could benefit from a workshop classroom and also could assume the personal responsibility necessary to make a workshop successful. But these same teachers often balked at the idea that students in

developmental classes could assume a similar level of responsibility. Others assumed that a process classroom would be unproductive for students whose sentence-level skills prevented them from producing standard academic prose. These teachers rationalized their resistance by turning to writers such as Francis Christiansen, who stated in *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric* that asking students to write whole essays before they had mastered the sentence was like sending untrained soldiers into battle.

Although these assumptions have been challenged in recent years by scholars such as Carol Edelsky, Marcia Farr, and Ann Raimes, large numbers of developmental composition classes nevertheless continue to focus on grammar exercises, subskills, and a bottom-up approach to writing. In other words, students in developmental writing classes generally have failed to benefit from the advances that have characterized mainstream composition studies over the last 20 years.

The failure to implement these advances has led to numerous theoretical and administrative inconsistencies in composition studies. I can't review all of them here, but perhaps one of the more obvious is the "us—them" dichotomy that seems to characterize the profession wherever developmental composition is concerned. At large schools like UNC Chapel Hill, for example, developmental classes make up only a small portion of the overall course offerings in composition, so there is pressure to give them less administrative attention than mainstream courses. Teachers often are reluctant to take on these courses because they require more effort and because the students may not be as verbally facile or outgoing as students in mainstream courses. Also, when considering ways to translate current theory into classroom practice, which places ever greater demands on students, there is the continuing and pervasive urge to assume that developmental students are incapable of meeting the challenge. Even teachers who extol the benefits of a student-centered classroom may argue for grammar exercises and handbooks in developmental courses.

Against this background, we can better understand the significance of the third phase of demographic change, which has challenged us to expand our notions of pluralism. It began in

earnest during the mid-1970s, when the United States relaxed its immigration policies for non-Europeans. Although the most visible and immediate beneficiaries were Vietnamese and Cambodians, this period also marked significant increases in the number of immigrants from Korea, Laos, China, Armenia, Iran, Arabia, Greece, India, Central and South America, and Mexico. Over the last few years, immigration from Southeast Asia and the Middle East has all but ceased, of course, but immigration from these other areas continues to be high.

One obvious result of this wave of immigration is that the number of nonnative English-speaking students in composition classes has increased markedly and is continuing to grow. According to various estimates, these students will make up the majority of enrollments in some areas of the country by the year 2000. Many colleges and universities in the West and Southwest have already experienced the challenges presented by teaching ESL students how to write in English well enough to meet the standards of academic and professional discourse. At UCLA, for example, a reported 80 percent of the student body are members of an ethnic minority, the two biggest groups being Asians and Hispanics, and a large number speak English as a second language.

Most of these ESL students are bright, motivated, and intent on achieving. In many cases, they are better prepared than their American counterparts, having attended schools in their native countries that stressed academics rather than sports and school spirit and that required students to attend many more days of school per year. Although their language skills cannot be equated with those of native speakers, most of these students cannot be readily classified as limited English proficient, either. Nevertheless, such students commonly find their way into developmental composition courses, either on the basis of SAT verbal scores or advice from a college counselor. Once there, they face a number of obstacles related to the cognitive deficiency model and a pedagogy that focuses on subskills rather than writing.

I don't want to suggest that ESL students shouldn't be in these courses, but it is clear that the traditional curriculum is ill-equiped to meet their needs and that the profession must make a concerted effort to reshape developmental writing. For example, the emphasis on grammar is problematic not only because it has no measurable effect on writing performance but also because

many ESL students, especially those from Asia, have received traditional grammar-translation training in English and consequently often know English grammar far better than their composition teachers. I remember observing a developmental class a few years ago on a day when the teacher was talking about prepositions. She put a transparency on the overhead projector that had a list of sentences using prepositions, and the first one was, "Rita placed the book on the table." A Japanese student asked the teacher if "place" is an example of an "incomplete transitive" verb. To her credit, the teacher only shrugged her shoulders and said she had no idea.

Over the last several years, I've had occasion to examine the syllabi for developmental courses in different parts of the country. What I've encountered is a standard sequence of subskill activities, ranging from grammar review to sentence construction and paragraph development. The end-of-the-semester project usually is a five-paragraph essay. But it's far too easy to criticize teachers who have failed to convert such traditional classes into more theoretically sound workshops when, in fact, the problem seems to be a lack of appropriate leadership among writing program directors. Because so many composition programs are staffed with part-time instructors and teaching assistants, program directors often have more training in composition theory and methods than the teachers they supervise. Consequently, any stimulus to modify existing curricula and methods must in most cases come from directors. They must provide the leadership in teacher training, assignment sequencing, and assessment necessary for a viable developmental course.

Without question, there are many reasons why such leadership has not been particularly evident over the years. I've already mentioned the administrative pressure to focus on mainstream courses. Better time management, however, can enable directors to eliminate this problem and give ESL students and developmental classes increased attention. Two other factors are more difficult to address. The first is systemic reluctance at many schools to recognized the growing presence of ESL students and the existence of their needs. We encounter such reluctance primarily at traditional schools that historically have enrolled very few ESL students but who nevertheless have had significant increases in ESL enrollments over the last 10 years. Yet even at schools with a strong ESL presence, some teachers and administrators may be inclined to view ESL students as less

prepared and less capable than native English speakers. I would suggest that the cognitive deficiency model is partially responsible for such perceptions. Because language functions so vitally as a means by which people evaluate one another, and because nonstandard speech is associated with intellectual deficiencies, many of our ESL students are prejudged to be less capable.

I also would suggest, however, that the reluctance to recognize the growing presence of ESL students is based on a preference—unconscious or not—for a status quo that does not include the sort of diversity that ESL students bring to a campus. In a report issued a few years ago, the National Science Foundation described how our society is becoming increasingly fragmented as a result of a fundamental sociological shift. Specific groups have become more homogeneous, while the differences between groups are increasing, leading to hostility and a growing perception of an undesirable "other."

In such cases, the program director must serve as an advocate for ESL students whenever he or she interacts with colleagues and supervisors. A goal in many cases must be to persuade the administration and fellow teachers that ESL students are not robbing native speakers of the chance to attend college. Another goal must be to convince the university community that ESL students deserve the same quality of instruction that native speakers receive. Unfortunately, the problem too often is cast in terms of competition for resources made ever scarcer by budget cuts and, at some schools, rising enrollments. In this environment, decisions generally are made on the basis of politics rather than equity, with the most funding going to those who make the loudest demands. For cultural and linguistic reasons known to those of us who work with nonnative speakers, the voices of ESL students seldom rise above the din.

Equally problematic are the obstacles presented by staff resistance to change. In some situations, especially where the staff is made up largely of faculty or teaching assistants in literature, directors will face skepticism—or even outright hostility—whenever raising the issue of theoretically informed pedagogy. For too many of these teachers, theories of composition and

learning are just so much hokum. Teaching is an art, an innate talent, they say—one is either born with it or one isn't.

A director therefore must ensure that the staff has a training program that does more than simply go over the nuts and bolts of classroom management. It should be grounded in current theory in ways that not only allow participants to understand the associated linguistic and pedagogical models but also in ways that allow them to understand how theory informs the courses they teach. There are many ways to accomplish this task, but at UNC Chapel Hill we use a combination of workshop simulations and video tapes of successful classrooms to help teachers new to the program attain a firm grasp of the relationship between theory and practice.

In addition, the training program must specifically address the needs of ESL students while simultaneously stressing that these needs will be met most effectively by using the same strategies that work for native speakers. Many years ago, Steve Krashen began describing the errors ESL writers produce as being developmental, and teachers can benefit from understanding what this means for their students. Quite simply, such errors will begin to disappear after repeated exposure to oral and written English accompanied by appropriate feedback that helps ESL students identify and then correct their errors. Learning English as a second language in this account is similar to acquiring a first language.

But perhaps an even greater administrative challenge lies in working with teachers to devise and implement a standardized curriculum that is congruent with the theoretical approach the director sets for the program. Arriving at the necessary consensus is difficult, not only for the reasons already discussed, such as resistance to the notion of theory, but also because many teachers feel that even well-intentioned efforts to standardize a curriculum infringe on their academic freedom. Patience and skill are required to lead teachers to the perception that the freedom to teach however they want is outweighed by the responsibility to students to provide the best instruction possible. Does it make sense, for example, to structure a class as lectures about

the characteristics of good writing when we know that students need practice at writing if they are to improve?

Moreover, a standardized curriculum does not imply a lock-step approach to instruction any more than the sonnet form shackles the poetic imagination. We know that collaborative learning activities enhance mastery of writing skills, and we know that immersion in a specific discourse community, ideally one that involves an apprenticeship, is a powerful way of helping students master various writing conventions. Consequently, a developmental curriculum should provide students opportunities for both collaboration and immersion. But the techniques available to implement these strategies are almost limitless. In addition, ESL students stand to benefit greatly from a curriculum that includes these and other theoretically sound features. Immersion is particularly effective because it expands students' language skills and serves to acculturate them to mainstream society.

This last factor strikes me as being very important in a developmental curriculum that aims to meet the needs of our increasingly pluralistic society. If sociologists are right—and I believe they are—if indeed our society is becoming ever more fragmented as groups isolate themselves on the basis of *difference*, composition teachers have an opportunity to take one small step toward reversing this unfortunate trend. By defining a developmental curriculum that incorporates the same strategies that characterize our mainstream classes, we will be emphasizing the fundamental *similarities* among students striving to become better writers. And in this way, we can begin to conceptualize a basic requirement in a truly pluralistic society.